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Research on Volunteerism...What Needs to Be Done

by Susan J. Ellis

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Author's note: Read this article in historical perspective and note which research topics are still untouched thirty years later.

One way to describe the needs for research in volunteerism is to say that everything is left to do. As a professional field, volunteer program management is less than 20 years old. While volunteers have been around since the days of the Mayflower, formal volunteer programs with trained leadership are a recent development. Volunteers themselves have largely been taken for granted. It is a new phenomenon to consider them a subject worthy of study. This is compounded by the fact that until only a few years ago, no academic major, either at the bachelor or advanced degree level, offered students courses in volunteer program management. Therefore, the subject was not even considered for serious attention.

In the past few years, however, some students and faculty have begun to show interest in questions related to the field of volunteerism. They are finding it difficult (if not impossible) to locate data with which to work and are beginning to recognize that information of the most elemental sort must first be uncovered for centralization of existing research, or--at a minimum--agreed-upon taxonomies for indexing/abstracting purposes. There are many unpublished master's and doctoral-level theses on university library shelves that are not being disseminated to serious volunteerism researchers. We need to bring this basic research out into the volunteerism forums.

It is important to use the terms volunteerism and voluntarism correctly, and not to confuse activities that utilize volunteers with general concerns of the "voluntary sector," much of which has nothing to do with "volunteers." In the same vein, the study of volunteering in relation to government agencies should not be confused with issues affecting nonprofit agencies only.

Stop the Fascination with Motivation

The only subject that seems to have come to the attention of researchers is "motivation." This seems to be based on some underlying incredulity such as "why would these people work for free?!" So academics keep doing surveys on "why." The problem is that the results are almost always the same: there are many motivations to volunteer, both altruistic and selfish, and while some of the reasons are related to age, gender, and the cause to be addressed, it's a personal decision. Ironically, despite these many studies, almost none look at what is much more important to real-world volunteer management practitioners: What *keeps* people volunteering? What *stops* them? Just

because someone started volunteering to make sure her or his child had a good after-school program does not explain why that volunteer is still at work years after the child has left the school.

New Research Horizons

The following is a list of subjects that either have not been studied at all or deserve far more attention. The list represents personal brainstorming, and topics are presented in no particular order. I make no claim that the list is complete; however, I have grouped the topics for easier discussion.

- **Who Volunteers:** Despite the growing amount of literature about volunteers, the truth is that very little has kinds of volunteer work. Studies tend to lump categories of volunteers together into large aggregates that do not illuminate possible important differences in patterns of volunteering among various populations. It is my contention that until we have clearly described who volunteers for what, we cannot move on to more in-depth studies of other issues relating to volunteers. We need to build on a firmer foundation of knowledge about volunteering than we presently have.
- Study a wide range of organizations such as courts, museums, sports groups, crisis centers, tenants unions, etc., and analyze the racial/economic/educational characteristics of volunteers. This not only would give a more realistic sense of who volunteers, but also would show which types of organizations benefit from the widest diversity of volunteers.
- Study all-volunteer groups (those not connected to any institution but operating independently) to see who belongs.
- Do an in-depth study of black volunteerism: What vocabulary do blacks of various income levels use to describe their helping patterns? What types of organizations attract blacks? Do educated blacks tend to follow white volunteer patterns? Are government-related volunteer programs unappealing to black volunteers, and if so, why?
- Do the same in-depth study with Asian volunteers, both Orientals who are second generation and newly-arrived immigrants or refugees.
- Do the same study with Native American volunteers (a big category which probably should itself be subdivided into Eskimo, Indian, etc.).
- Do the same study with Hispanic volunteers (again, perhaps some subdivisions would be revealing, such as Puerto Ricans vs. Cubans vs. South Americans, or refugees vs. voluntary immigrants).
- Do the same study with low-income volunteers, across racial or ethnic lines. Some of the same questions might be fascinating to answer for upper-income volunteers, too.
- One long-unrecognized subject is that of the independent, individual volunteer--the person who crusades for a particular cause or provides some sort of community assistance without affiliating with a group to do so. Who are these people? How many are there? (Ivan Scheier has been urging our field to consider this subject for some time.)

- On the subject of men and women doing volunteer work, what is really needed is a study of whether the types of volunteering done by both groups is changing (which implies that we know what the history of both groups has been). Are there more women in policy-making roles now? Are more men doing direct service work? Why or why not?

SPECIAL MOTIVATION ISSUES

- What happens when volunteers have been with an organization for a long time, especially on the board of directors? What special type of "vested interest" (if any) replaces the usual objectivity we assign to volunteer involvement?
- Is there evidence that people volunteer as adults in gratitude for help given to them as children by other adult volunteers? For example, do people become troop leaders or Big Brothers/Sisters because they were scouts or Little Brothers/Sisters when young? This "repaying a debt" can also be studied in terms of volunteering for any organization that helped a person or a family in the recent past.
- Is there actually some measurable difference between the motivation and/or effectiveness of student volunteers vs. any other type of volunteer? Or, between students who receive academic credit for their service vs. students who are "pure" volunteers?
- What is the effect of giving money--in any quantity--on volunteering? Is it more than an "enabling" factor? Does it provide recognition? Is it received as a form of "earnings by the volunteer and/or is it seen as such by the salaried staff? When do "enabling funds" become a "stipend" and when does a "stipend" become a "salary," and does the level of money involved affect the volunteer work provided?
- How about a study of the motivation differences between volunteers and salaried staff? (Compare the two groups on the basis of genuinely comparable work assigned.)
- Does volunteering as a student introduce men to "new" types of volunteer work, especially direct service? And does this introduction lead to continued volunteering in such roles later in life?
- What happens to the dynamics of a situation when a volunteer is hired to become part of staff? Or when a salaried staff member chooses to leave the job and volunteer in the agency instead (retirement, maternity leave, etc.)? What do such changes imply for the broader picture of acceptance of volunteers?
- In regard to the preceding subject, why is it that in many cases an agency makes a specific decision not to consider present volunteers for job openings? What are the pro and con effects on volunteers and on salaried staff of such a decision? Can data be developed for how often volunteers are indeed hired by the organizations for which they volunteered?

Overview Subjects

- Israel and England are the only two countries about which more than a few lines have been written regarding volunteer involvement. This leaves the rest of the world, and even the rest of Great Britain.

- History also remains untouched. The book I co-authored in 1978, *By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers*, remains the ONLY book devoted exclusively to the history of volunteers in this country. There is room for more overview history and for some specific studies of the development of volunteering in particular fields/geographic regions/special causes.
- An examination of who is a "director of volunteers." The people who carry responsibility for recruiting and working with volunteers do not always have a job title reflecting that assignment. How many people really do head volunteer programs? How many do so part-time? Full-time? What other titles exist? Where do professions such as "clergy" or "political campaign manager" fit into the overall picture of volunteer administration?

Organization-Related

- Develop some tools for effective screening out of "inappropriate" volunteers, especially those being referred for therapeutic reasons. Or tools for finding the right assignment for hard-to-place volunteers (other than the usual vocational counseling aids).
- Legal issues have hardly been touched except for general discussions of insurance and liability. What lawsuits have involved volunteers, and what are their implications to programs and to other volunteers?
- What are examples of true collaboration between volunteer programs?
- Develop tools to measure the effectiveness of volunteers in terms of the many assignments that ask volunteers to affect the "quality of life" of clients (homebound visitation, victim assistance, etc.).
- Have agencies adapted to the needs of employed volunteers? Are there new assignments on weekends or during the evening? Are short-term assignments being developed successfully?
- Eva Schindler-Rainman has been focusing recently on what she calls "transitional volunteers," people who have undergone major life changes, employment changes, or therapeutic treatment and who need volunteer work to move from one stage of life to another. How prevalent is this type of volunteer? What impact does this type of volunteer have on an agency? Are agencies able to cope with the possible special concerns of such volunteers? Is volunteering really a successful transitioning tool?

Other Categories

- Can job-related skill development through volunteering be documented, particularly in terms of retraining of unemployed people, resulting in new employment?
- What do VACs (Voluntary Action Centers) accomplish? Do a comparison of VACs to find effective models. Do a study of what communities may need from VACs that they are not now receiving. What happens in communities without a VAC?
- Are there enough similarities or common interests among volunteers to warrant the formation of state or national associations of volunteers? Conferences for volunteers? This is connected to the expectation that

volunteers, as a generic group, can be mobilized to advocate for issues affecting them, such as mileage deductions, etc.

- Does community volunteering by employees benefit the corporation supporting such volunteering? How, exactly? Is morale improved? Are skills learned in the community transferable to the profit-making world? Does this change if the volunteering is done on company work-release time vs. on the employee's personal time?
- Ivan Scheier has spoken of the "volunteerization of the workplace," meaning that the techniques of motivating people other than through a paycheck are increasingly being discussed by employers concerned about "productivity" and "quality control." What indeed is the correlation between volunteer work and salaried work in terms of motivation and/or supervision techniques that can be adapted from the volunteer world to the business world?
- What is the dollar value of unreported in-kind and volunteer support for nonprofit organizations? Why are so many national organizations reluctant to report these values in their annual financial statements? What unreported support is being given to professional associations by nonprofits/government agencies through: assumption of mailing costs, long distance phone calls, office supplies, and especially staff time?
- Do "civic groups" consider themselves volunteers in the traditional sense (Kiwanis, Lions, Rotary, etc.)? Does this impact on male/female issues in volunteering?
- Have any agencies cut their budgets and "substituted" volunteers for paid staff? What has happened?

Summary

Volunteerism is a fertile field for research. Not only are the subjects above of academic interest, they are also of immediate usefulness to practitioners in volunteer programs. It is not going to be easy to develop research designs to tackle the topics listed because documentation is often nonexistent for many volunteer activities. This is changing, however, as record keeping becomes more developed for volunteer programs. I urge researchers to consider going beyond the ordinary to study volunteerism. The potential rewards are many.

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